

# INCLUDING CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

## A Perspective

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*Federal law mandates that children with disabilities be provided a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. The concept of inclusion, in which children with special needs receive their education in the regular classrooms with resource and support personnel present as needed, has many advocates, particularly among parents of special needs students. However, in religious schools, inclusion may prevent such children from obtaining a quality Jewish education. Therefore, children with special needs should be integrated into the mainstream only when educationally appropriate.*

Education was forever changed by the 1975 federal Act, Public Law 94-142. The All-Handicapped Act now known as IDEA — Individuals With Disabilities Education Act — outlined specific rules and regulations pertaining to children with disabilities. It mandates that children with disabilities be provided a free, appropriate, public education in the least restrictive environment. That is, they are to be educated with their peers in their local schools or in consortiums created by several schools. Placement is to be guided by a multifaceted evaluation, and parents are to be included in all educational decisions regarding their children.

In 1984, in an effort to develop further the relationship between regular and special education, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, introduced the Regular Education Initiative. In 1986 Madeleine Will, Assistant Secretary of Education, presented a paper, "Educating Children with Learning Problems: A Shared Responsibility," which promoted the merging of regular and special education. It supported the notion of *inclusion*, a concept that all children have the right to be included with their peers in all age-appropriate activities throughout life. It argued that inclusion should occur naturally and should not require special program design, such as mainstreaming, and that children should re-

ceive their education in the regular classroom with resource and support personnel present.

The Regular Education Initiative's (REI) attempt to forge a relationship between regular and special education has thrust the idea of inclusion to center stage, making it one of the major educational issues of the 1990s. Its impact is being felt throughout the education community, although it has not been met with universal support. For example, the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities asserted in 1991 that, although "many children and youth with diverse learning needs can and should be educated in the regular education classroom, the regular classroom is not a substitute for the full continuum necessary to assure the provision of an appropriate education for students with learning disabilities" (LDA Newsbriefs, 1991). This point of view is echoed by many groups representing children with a variety of special needs.

In contrast, and regardless of the preparedness of the teacher, parents are persistent in requesting placement for their children in the regular classroom. This attitude is understandable because for so many years exceptional children were not embraced by the schools. In their zeal to protect their children from exclusion and to ensure an appropriate placement, parents seem to have lost sight of the fact that an untrained teacher can do irreparable damage and can

undo all the progress that has been made on behalf of children with special needs.

Thus, the issue seems to be joined between parents who seek inclusion and some professionals who see exclusion as being of greater benefit to those children. Although there are teachers in our public schools for whom the challenges might be welcome, the fact remains that even interested and well-meaning teachers are not trained to serve effectively as instructors in a class that merges regular and special education. Further, with crowded classrooms, limited administrative and collegial support, and so little time, many argue that placing students with special needs in the regular classroom presents yet another obstacle to an already overburdened system. Too much energy, at the expense of education, would have to be spent integrating students into the mainstream.

While we have embraced children with special needs, albeit slowly, and created a multitude of educational programs for them, we have yet to lay the necessary groundwork for appropriate teacher education programs that would enable present or new teachers in the field to meet the educational demands of the 1990s. Since the inception of PL 94-142, teachers have demonstrated difficulty adapting and modifying the curriculum for children who have special learning needs. Teacher preparation has been inconsistent and remains at the heart of the problem. Consequently, little has been done to adapt learning environments for children with special needs, even though major changes in today's classroom are needed to do so.

Although many preschool settings provide an integrated approach in which children with special needs are being educated with typically developing students, we seldom see a carryover into kindergarten and beyond. Traditionally, when children reach a level where paper and pencil tasks become central to the teaching/learning act, teacher flexibility and creativity become less apparent. While the superior student learns in

spite of the teaching approach, the student with special needs begins to fall behind. With each passing year, the disparity between the groups and attendant problems increase both academically and socially.

Crucial to achieving full inclusion is a systematic approach that takes into consideration the varying needs of individual students and integrates them into every facet of the school's life. As well, success is dependent on active participation by everyone involved in the system, specifically those most intimately involved with the delivery of services.

In conjunction with the education efforts now in place, recent Congressional acts guarantee the fair treatment of all individuals with disabilities. Advocates hope that this governmental endeavor will safeguard the rights of exceptional individuals. However, our experience in education tells us that individuals with disabilities will not be welcomed into the workplace unless the prevailing public attitude is changed. That can occur only through education. Just as the entire school community must learn about diversity and differences, so too must the general public. Providing a knowledge base will help eradicate the discomfort and misunderstanding that seem to be at the heart of the problem.

The Jewish community is in many ways a microcosm of the larger community. We too have had difficulty including individuals who are different in community life. In many cases, our rabbis and those at the highest levels of leadership have yet to come to terms with their own views of exceptional individuals. Often, they themselves are uncomfortable with them, lacking the resources and skills to respond and interact appropriately. Through staff development and education, our leadership would gain a greater awareness and appreciation for the differences among us. The greater their comfort level, the more easily they will provide opportunities for exceptional individuals to be included in Jewish community life.

Especially in Jewish supplementary education we face critical teacher shortages (Commission on Jewish Education, 1991). Those who choose the profession frequently have inadequate Jewish backgrounds and require intensive training. With a limited repertoire, these teachers are often unable to modify the curriculum to meet the needs of their students. Moreover, schools typically offer a limited number of contact hours so that consistency and follow-through are extremely difficult to achieve. To add a responsibility for children with special needs to this uncertain mix complicates the task enormously. In addition to the usual burdens on a teacher and a school, teaching children with disabilities requires a knowledge of special education and an appreciation for differences among students. A well-trained Judaic teacher who possesses these characteristics or is willing to learn them is not easy to find. Further, budgetary constraints prevent Jewish school administrators from offering monetary incentives to prospective teachers to encourage them to undertake such a task.

We face a danger in thrusting children whom we have only just begun to recognize and for whom we have only just begun to provide programming into the regular classroom. Given the current state of Jewish education, inclusion may indeed allow Jewish children with special needs to participate side-by-side with their typically developing peers, but it may prevent them from obtaining a quality Jewish education and certainly will not provide the peer acceptance that advocates seek.

Today, the number of Jewish communities committed to serving the educational needs of these children is on the rise. Many children with special needs are now participating in all phases of Jewish education, including Jewish rites of passage to which

they are entitled. In many communities special education personnel assist in direct teacher training and coaching in an effort to ensure that an appropriate Jewish education is being provided for children with special needs. But what of community support and involvement beyond the school years?

Essential questions remain unanswered for public and Jewish education. What is the most appropriate education in the least restrictive environment? What tools are our teachers being given to include exceptional children in the classroom? What roles will we provide them in their adult years?

We must begin to examine these issues on a communal level and develop long-term, viable solutions. Until then, those in Jewish education should continue to integrate students into the mainstream only when and where it is educationally appropriate. The primary goal should be to provide these students with instruction in a proper environment that will allow mastery of the material and offer appropriate avenues for socialization with their Jewish peers. In addition, our community should consider how best to ensure that the education being provided in the schools does not take place in a vacuum, leaving little opportunity for its expression in later years.

## REFERENCES

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